



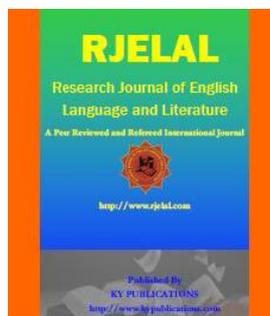
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH BEFORE AND AFTER RENAISSANCE: A BIBLICAL PERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Christianity emerged from patriarchal societies that placed men in positions of authority in marriage, society and government, and, in the early centuries while the religion restricted membership of the priesthood to males only, it offered women an enhanced social status. Women constitute a great majority of members of the Episcopal life within the Catholic Church, the largest among Christian churches. In recent decades, ordination of women has become increasingly common in some Protestant churches. Women in secular jobs have also been highly active in the wider life of churches, supporting the community work of parishes.

Before Renaissance, there were some serious misconceptions about women which were imposed upon society quoting some isolated verses from the Bible. The modern method of interpretation demands interpretation of any text in its whole context. Especially the Bible as one book must be interpreted considering other texts on the same issue. This paper is a study of the perverted view of women imposed by early churches and an effort of reinterpreting some difficult texts of the Bible.

KEY WORDS: Women, Church, Christianity, Renaissance

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INTRODUCTION

Women in Church history have played a variety of roles in the life of Christianity - notably as contemplatives, health care givers, educationalists and missionaries. Until recent times, women were generally excluded from Episcopal and clerical positions within the churches, however great numbers of women have been influential in the life of the church - from contemporaries of Jesus, to subsequent saints, theologians, missionaries, abbesses, nuns, mystics, founders of religious institutes, military leaders, monarchs and martyrs.

Christianity emerged from patriarchal societies that placed men in positions of authority in

marriage, society and government, and, whilst the religion restricted membership of the priesthood to males only, in its early centuries it offered women an enhanced social status. Women constitute the great majority of members of the consecrated life within the Catholic Church, the largest of the Christian churches. In recent decades, ordination of women has become increasingly common in some Protestant churches. Laywomen have also been highly active in the wider life of churches, supporting the community work of parishes.

In the present paper I would like to critically analyze the role and position of women in the church before the renaissance and after.

DISCUSSION

Before Renaissance, there were some serious misconceptions about women which were imposed upon society quoting some isolated verses from the Bible. The modern method of interpretation demands interpretation of any text in its whole context. Especially the Bible as one book must be interpreted considering other texts on the same issue. This paper is a study of the perverted view of women imposed by early churches and an effort of reinterpreting some difficult texts of the Bible.

Women of the Old Testament in the Babylonian society occupied a subordinate role. Progeny was the ultimate aim of marriage and a woman was honored only for her motherhood. When some women could not bear child their husbands were allowed to take their concubines as their wives sometimes even their own wives forced their concubines to become their husband's wives and bear child. Men held control over the women and divorce was within his right. Adultery on the part of a woman was punishable by death. Arrangement of marriage was by parental choice. Wife did not inherit her husband's property by right. Very few if ever participated in official duties of the state and religious ceremonies. Women were considered to be of a lower intellectual level than men, learning was exclusive to men. As was a common saying, "the torah should be burnt rather than entrusted to women". Men did not take women in public. They were numbered with slaves and children. Some of these misconceptions were based on biblical misinterpretations.

Man is superior to woman; this was supported by bible verses Gen. 1:27 and 5:1 where it says that; God created man in His own image', but if we further read the text we find that the Bible, continues to say that He created man. This man God created in his own image included both male and female it is clear from the text that man in the creation includes both male and female. Woman is a slave to do man's will, this was supported by bible verse, Gen. 3:16 where it is written, that to the woman He (God) said, your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you. In the light of creation model, this statement is the curse inflicted

upon woman because of sin. The climax of the story of creation is seen the redemptive work of Christ on the cross where penalty for sin was borne by Christ and liberation proclaimed in God's original plan; "the Lord God said it is not good for man to be alone I will make a helper suitable for him." ((Gen. 2:18). The original word, 'helper' is EZER in Hebrew, which means to surround and therefore to protect and aid. Thus a woman was created as a co - worker to man, a positive compliment and not a supplement to him, a companionship in every situation.

Woman is inferior to man and is a sub creation, this belief prevailed on the basis of woman from the rib he had taken out of the man; the thing to notice is that God did not make woman from the bone of the skull otherwise woman would be above man (rule over him) neither he made her from the bone of the ankle which could imply her to be of low status rather God made woman from the rib giving her equal status with man. Saint Paul concluded this fact in 1 Cor. 11:1 In the Lord, however woman is not independent of man nor is man independent of woman.

Women are cursed; this belief was based on gen 3:16 to the woman he (God) said, "I will greatly increase your pain in childbearing with pain you will give birth to children your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you." But if we read the text before and after this cursed one, "you will be above all the livestock and all the wild animals I will put enmity between your offspring and he will crush your head and you will strike his heel;" Gen. 3:14-15. Again in Gen. 3:17 it is written, "To Adam, He (God) said, "cursed is the ground because of you" Now in both the preceding and subsequent verses to Gen. 3:16 it is clearly neither Adam nor Eve but only the serpent (the form of Satan) and the earth, (ground) were cursed. Instead, we notice that God had already blessed them (Gen. 1:28.)

There has been a radical change in the status, validity, ministry and role of women after the Renaissance. Theologians have reviewed the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ and Saint Paul. A closer look into the gospels reveals Jesus' attitude towards women although He never taught on the subject of women's rights or rebuked directly on

the then existing position of women but he demonstrated by action that he held women in equal respect and importance of men. Jesus particularly ministered some women with questionable character viz, Mary Magdalene who was forced to live a life of prostitute because of socioeconomic oppression. He also ministered the Samaritan woman who was divorced five times by five different men and was used by another man without marrying her, thus enjoying marriage without obligation and responsibilities of marriage. Once a woman was brought to Jesus caught in adultery. According to the law such a woman had to be stoned to death. Jesus rebuked the masses by asking them to throw stone only if they were blameless. The first blame was that they did not bring the adulterous man while catching the women.

After resurrection also Jesus first appeared to women. He revealed great truths to them. To Martha, He said, "I am the resurrection and life." (Jn. 11:25-26) St. Paul's attitude towards woman should also be considered. The often repeated verse against woman participation in the church is I Corinthians 14:34 "...let your women keep silence in the churches..." for they were not permitted to speak but if we study the situation at that time it was a contextual command that the women should keep silent in the church service. If they had any questions in that situation they were advised to discuss them with their husbands at home. Women at that time had low status. In the Greek world, Sophocles had said, "Silence confers grace upon a woman." The Jews gave very low position to women. They even prayed; "Lord, I thank you that I was not born a woman. A Rabbinic saying was, "To teach a woman is throwing pearls before swine." Among the plagues of the world were also listed, the talkative women, the inquisitive widow and the virgin who wastes her time in prayers. Paul was well aware of all these and he had already faced difficult situation in Corinth. It was an infant church just established. Considering the lax moral state at Corinth, he was anxious to preserve the good name of the congregation. Women had to be wise in using their newly given liberty in Christ. Paul is also protesting against the disturbance of service by

feminine chatter. Paul did not condemn women to complete silence in the church, for he mentions some able women to prophesy (1st Cor. 11:5, Act. 21:9) and this gift was to be exercised in public.

Men too were instructed to be 'silent' at some occasions; all those who spoke in tongues were asked to become silent when there was no one to interpret. The prophets were also asked to be silent if another man had some special revelation (1st Cor. 4: 30). Thus it will be unjustified to take these words of Paul to the Corinthians, out of the context for which they were written and make them a universal rule for the church for all times.

Another issue is Paul's instruction for women to cover their heads. In so doing he wanted them to follow the tradition of veiling. The Greeks and Jews considered the veil as the symbol of marriage. A woman without a veil in public dishonored the marriage vow and was liable to be divorced. Therefore, Paul strongly recommended them to conform to the existing social customs and wanted the churches to maintain decency and dignity. In saying that this was a sign of subordination to men, Paul was explaining the hierarchal structure of "God and Man" relationship. God is the head of Christ; Christ is the head of man and man is the head of woman. This does not mean that women cannot take active part in the Church.

By the development of this theological belief system, by and large the women workers in the ministry of the church have increased numerically. Women can be seen as Sunday school teachers, matrons, and wardens of hostels, Bible women, teachers and Pastors. While in secular world, all high positions are equally held by women, the challenge still remain as to whether a woman can ever become a Bishop, Metropolitan or Pope?

If we cast a glance on the world we find that the position of women in churches today have only reached to position of class II citizens in the 1st and 11nd world countries, the salary structure of women is also badly compatible to men holding same or similar posts in churches.

Social, economical and political conditions pose serious limitation on the role of women and the churches have not been exceptional. Although modern churches are standing in solidarity with the

oppressed and the poor, women being also a class worth paying attention, they are still denied privileges as men. Social set up of different communities offer a lot of resistance to women workers because of traditional religious ethos. In the same pattern Christian denominations hold different views on women's ministry and restrict their participation in various spheres. Biological and physiological factors also pose serious restrictions for full freedom and movement due to psycho endocrinological reasons mostly women prefer to take subordinate role instead of full leadership as man.

FINDING

In the view of foregoing analysis, here are a few suggestions which are open to criticism and reflection by the reader of this paper.

The church should develop a new sensitivity to the socio political and economic condition and develop awareness to the particular needs of the people both within the church and outside, using men and women equally. The church should develop a new sensitivity to indigenous religious orientations and adopt the methods which absorb all people.

The theological school should train men and women for future ministry with a new outlook, remembering the contemporary change. Opportunities must be given to all women to be trained to participate in the total life of the church.

The ordination may be preferably given to trained couple. Also single ordained priests should be encouraged to marry and appointed as joint ministers of the church. So we face a new challenge to re evaluate the role of women. The woman is shaped to an independent existence in the image of God. She possesses the same status as men and holds dominion over creation as do men.

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